

Ex-CIA Officer: Colleagues Said Oswald on Payroll

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A former finance officer for the CIA has testified before the House Select Committee on Assassinations that his colleagues had told him that Lee Harvey Oswald was a secret operative for the agency in Japan in the late 1950s.

The witness, James B. Wilcott, who said he had served in the CIA from 1957 through April 1966, contended in an interview that conversations in the agency's Tokyo station after President Kennedy's assassination Nov. 22, 1963, persuaded him that Oswald, who had served as a Marine in the Far East, had been recruited by the agency to infiltrate the Soviet Union.

Wilcott said that he testified under oath at a closed session of the House committee Wednesday, supplying the names of several CIA officials who might be able to give further details.

ROBERT BLAKEY, chief counsel and staff director of the assassinations committee, declined to comment. But an interim committee report indicated that, although it had conducted some 1,400 field interviews, the committee had chosen to fly relatively few witnesses to Washington to obtain formal, sworn testimony.

According to several sources, the committee was investigating Wilcott's testimony.

Wilcott said he joined the CIA as a low-ranking finance officer in 1957 and was sent to Tokyo in 1960. At the Tokyo station, which was in a building

that ostensibly housed U.S. Air Force personnel, Wilcott said, his responsibilities included making cash disbursements for projects identified only by code names called "cryptos."

He said his wife was a clerical employee of the agency at that time and that he stood "watch shifts" to earn extra money.

Wilcott said that although the traditions and the regulations of the agency separated members of the support staff such as himself from intelligence officers and other officials, he fraternized with operational personnel while he was on night-watch duty, in occasional off-duty conversations and at his teller's cage.

IN THE MONTHS after Kennedy's death he had several conversations with personnel involved in covert operations, he said, and those talks persuaded him that Oswald, who had been stationed at Atsugi Air Base, in Japan, had been recruited to infiltrate the Soviet Union as a spy.

Wilcott said he could recall only one specific conversation, which occurred shortly after Jack Ruby shot Oswald. In an account of the conversation that he prepared for publication, Wilcott noted, "I was talking with someone, I can't recall who for sure, and I expressed disbelief about Oswald even being a CIA project. I was told something like, 'Well, Jim, so and so drew an advance sometime in the past from you for Oswald' or 'for that project under such and such a crypto.'"

"It was a familiar cryptonym to me at the time, which I have since forgotten, as well as the time that the advance of funds was drawn," he wrote.

Wilcott, a gray-haired man of medium height, said that his memory was sketchy after 15 years, and there appear to be discrepancies in his recollections. For instance, he remembered having learned of the Kennedy assassination on an afternoon flight of a private plane. However, Kennedy was shot at midday in Dallas, which would have been early the next morning in Japan.

OSWALD SERVED in the Far East from 1957 until November 1958 and was discharged from the Marine Corps before Wilcott was sent to Tokyo. Wilcott said that he had been told that Oswald had been taken to Japan for questioning after returning from the Soviet Union in 1962.

There has been speculation about whether Oswald came under the control of the CIA in Japan. In a recent book, "Legend, the Secret World of Lee Harvey Oswald," Edward Jay Epstein describes Oswald's interest in the Russian language and his strange contacts with Japanese civilians.

But officials of the agency have denied under oath having ever recruited, trained or manipulated Oswald, and former senior officials of the agency have angrily denounced as irresponsible attempts to connect the agency to the assassination.

The agency will not say whether it has employed individuals. Wilcott said that after leaving Tokyo in June 1964 he served at the agency's main headquarters and at the station in Miami before resigning in 1966.

He said he later became active in the movement against the Vietnam War and developed an interest in left-wing political causes. He said that he began circulating his account of the conversations concerning Oswald several years ago but that they were never published.

One source said the committee learned about Wilcott's story from Philip Agee, a former CIA agent who published a book attacking the agency. Wilcott was represented at the committee hearing by William H. Schaap, one of Agee's lawyers.